Benedict Anderson's Flawed Definition of a "Nation"

In *Imagined Communities,* Benedict Anderson presents his theories of nationalism and its relations to other communities. He begins his work with a definition of what he defines as a "nation". Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation in his work *Imagined Communities* became one of the most widely used definitions when describing the nationalist movement. He defines a nation as an imagined community of people who feel a connection to each other despite the impossibilities of knowing every person in the nation and the inequalities that frequent nations.[1] Despite the popularity of his definition, it has flaws. Anderson hastily defines a nation in his introduction, only to author a book based on nationalism, omitting any distinction between the two terms and sections. The two concepts, a nation and nationalism, differ. A nation typically refers to a political group of people, while nationalism refers to movements on a national scale related to many aspects of identity. Benedict Anderson's definition lacks limits on what a "nation" refers to, as his definition can encompass all aspects of identity, and fails to make accommodations in his definition for nations that have serious internal struggles.

As written by editors Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex in the introduction of *The Ethnicity Reader*, "…nationalism emerged as an ideology centered on the sentiment of belonging to a particular community and the subsequent desire to see it flourish and develop."[2] Anderson argues that the rise of nationalism correlates to the fall of religion, in which case it makes sense that people searched for community in another platform of nationalism. Yet Anderson does not distinguish between *nationalism* and a *nation* so that Guibernau's definition of nationalism,

> **Comment [JWG1]:** good

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[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 5–6.
[2] Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex, eds., *The Ethnicity Reader*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Polity Press, 2010), 4.

written over 20 years after Anderson's *Imagined Communities* published, correlates to Anderson's definition of a nation.

Merriam Webster dictionary defines a nation as "a community of people composed of one or more nationalities and possessing a more or less defined territory and government."[3] Nationalism, in contrast, is defined as "exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to other nations or supranational groups."[4] Supranational meaning "transcending national boundaries, authorities, or interests."[5] In this sense a nation exists as a different entity than nationalism; nationalism focuses on culture and can transcend national boundaries, while a nation acts as a political body and has territorial limits. Benedict Anderson makes no such distinction between the two terms in *Imagined Communities.*

Benedict Anderson implies in his definition of a nation that the only real outcome of an imagined community is a nation. However, several forms of communal identity can be characterized as imagined communities. Communities and nations in themselves can be assembled in many different ways. Anderson offers a limited explanation in that he does not cover the different ways a community or nation can take form. Anderson also offers a general definition of a specific communal identity that in turn blankets every aspect of identity under one word without distinction of any kind.

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[3] "Nation," Online Dictionary, *Merriam-Webster*, accessed May 19, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nation.
[4] "Nationalism," Online Dictionary, *Merriam-Webster*, accessed May 19, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nationalism.
[5] "Supranational," Online Dictionary, *Merriam-Webster*, accessed May 19, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/supranational.

One of the more evident flaws in Anderson's definition comes from how general his definition is. Any aspect of an individual's identity that forms an imagined community (religious, ethnic, cultural, etc.) can fall under Anderson's definition. Benedict Anderson fails to distinguish nationality from other aspects of identity, and thus his definition is flawed.

Comment [JWG4]: good

Benedict Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community…imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[6] His concept of nation has four trademark characteristics: "imagined," "limited," "sovereign," and a "community."[7] A nation is "imagined" because it is impossible for a member of the nation to know every member, they are far too big.[8] A nation is "limited" because at some point it must have a boundary, after which follows other nations. Multiple nations must exist because a nation is not a nation without the existence of a plural.[9] A nation is "sovereign" in that it is formed on the basis of freedom. He compares this "sovereignty" to that of religions' pluralism.[10] A nation is a "community" in that a pretense of comradeship exists, false or not, despite inequality and exploitation that inevitable runs within.[11] Through these characteristics Benedict Anderson tries to label nations as imagined communities that rely on imagined connections between people.

Comment [JWG5]: This is a funny sort of definitional limitation. I may think of myself as an Ithacan, or a Cornellian, but I don't (and can't) know everyone in these communities.

Comment [JWG6]: What about totalitarian states? Are they still nations, or are they something else?

Comment [JWG7]: You might have been better off with a different word here, like "perceived", only because you've used the word "imagined" quite a lot to this point.

Benedict Anderson argues that to analyze nations, one must consider "how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy."[12] In this analysis he tries to find

[6] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.
[7] Ibid., 6–7.
[8] Ibid., 6.
[9] Ibid., 7.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 4.

what made a nation and how it was formed into its modern version and why individuals feel strong loyalties to their nation and its inhabitants.

While true in some senses, Benedict Anderson's definition offers no limits on what a nation is, other than that other nations exist so boundaries must exist between nations. Benedict Anderson's definition of a "nation" does not explicitly separate nations from other forms of communal identity and thus generalizes nations as any form of community large enough to be "imagined" in his statement "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined."[13] Serious technical issues arise from Benedict Anderson's definition of a "nation" because it lacks limitations on size and type of identity. By his definition, a nation could consist of any community too big for everyone to know each other and small enough to have other nations. His definition could account for small towns and extend to the entirety of the human race, given of course that the boundary of the human race consists of the "nation" of animals of the "nation" of aliens. He creates a Russian nesting doll of communities, where smaller imagined communities fit into larger ones on a hierarchical scale. He makes no distinction between a so-called imagined community and a nation, playing only on the assumption that the reader can distinguish between the two. A distinction must exist to make his definition more telling of what a nation does and does not consist of.

Religious and ethnic groups, by technicality, can fall under Anderson's vague definition of nations. Religious and ethnic groups fall under the four characteristics: "imagined," "limited," "sovereign," and "community." Technically speaking, any characteristic aspect of identity could create a "nation" because a nation, by Benedict Anderson's definition, connects people through

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[13] Ibid., 6.

imagined bonds of brotherhood. If someone identifies as African American, per chance, they might also feel a connection to the African American community. In the same way that Anderson thinks of nations by analyzing how they have come to be, how they have changed, and why they have "profound emotional legitimacy" today, other aspects of identity can be analyzed through that lens.[14] The communities fostered through a feeling of identity each hold historical and emotional significance in the world.

Benedict Anderson does little to distinguish political nations from other communal groups, creating blurred lines about what constitutes a nation and what does not. Anderson mentions religious and ethnic groups in passing, but does not offer a solid distinction between the two groups and a "nation". He continues to label a "nation" as a political entity, therefore causing the assumption that he believes religious and ethnic groups to be some "other," despite the influences that both religion and ethnicity can have on politics. Ashutosh Varshney writes about ethnic conflict that extends into politics with his statement, "ethnic conflicts, while grounded in ascriptive group identities, are not always about identities."[15] Ethnic conflict can relate to "economic resources, seats in parliament, and schools, about job quotas or affirmative action."[16] Varshney touches on the idea that while ethnicities have basis in identity, they can play a significant role in politics and cause conflict on the national scale.

According to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, the distinction between a nation and ethnicity involves a relation to the state, "whereas many ethnic groups do not demand command over a

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[14] Ibid., 4.
[15] Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civil Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven & London: Yale University, 2009), 26.
[16] Ibid.

state."[17] However when an ethnic group attempts to command a state, "the ethnic movement therefore by definition becomes a nationalist movement."[18]

Ethnicity, in its extremity, can take the form of a nation. The concept of ethnic nationalism, viewed as an ideal in some parts of the world, takes its form in several countries worldwide. Nationality in ethnic nationalism is "inherent—one can neither acquire it if one does not have it, nor change it if one does; it has nothing to do with an individual will, but constitutes a genetic characteristic."[19] Ethnic nationalism, if not properly controlled, can cause conflict between ethnic nations, as is in the case of Iraq.

Toby Dodge writes that "the political utility of communal identity is defined by and reacts to the changing nature of society and crucially how a state seeks to interact with and control its population."[20] He theorizes that in certain situations, "ethnic or religiously based identities may come to dominate political mobilization."[21] With the collapse of the Iraqi state, Dodge writes that people began to rely on other communal groups for safety, specifically ethnic and sectarian communal identity.[22] As the reliance on communal identities grew, certain groups tried to incite violence between the different identities. Muqtada al-Sadr "utilized nationalist and radical Islamic trends amongst sections of the Shia population" and "a growing radical Sunni jihadist section of the insurgency has sought to encourage civil war by murdering high-profile Shia and Kurdist political figures…"[23] Ultimately this growing ethnic nationalism helped push

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[17] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Ethnicity, Race, and Nation," ed. Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex, *The Ethnicity Reader 2nd Ed.*, 2010, 47–48.
[18] Ibid., 48.
[19] Liah Greenfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 11.
[20] Toby Dodge, "State Collapse and the Rise of Identity Politics in Iraq," ed. Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex, *The Ethnicity Reader 2nd Ed.*, 2010, 112.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 114.
[23] Ibid., 118–19.

Iraq into a civil war. The people, instead of relying on the political nation for community, relied on their ethnic nation and thus caused conflict between the different ethnicities. When Iraq's political nation held more power, the idea of a multi-ethnic state held plausibility. But as the state's power fell, ethnic nations took the place of the political nation.

A nation in itself can take the form of an aspect of identity, specifically within countries with strict immigration laws or naturalization practices, such as in Germany. The naturalization process in Germany "is perceived to be not only a change in legal status, but a change in nature, a change in political and cultural identity…"[24] Naturalization processes in certain nations involve intensive integration and citizens of the nation take them seriously. Failure to naturalize can result in discrimination and anger. In this sense, nations in themselves function as cultural identities, which explains why nations often have stereotypes of certain characteristics, however wrong they may or may not be. Aspects of identity all fall under Anderson's definition with no real distinction between what a nation can or cannot be. Nations are often riddled with their own characteristic identities and require immigrants of that nation to adopt that identity in order to fully assimilate. In more extreme cases, cultural identity is so central to a nation that citizenship can be impossible to obtain. As in the case of Germany, citizenship is acquired only on basis of descent, birth or a long residence in the country have no effect on citizenship status.[25] This birthright citizenship alludes to the more extreme ethnic nationalism mentioned previously. Preserving this cultural identity in such an extreme way only points to the idea that nations function as aspects of identity.

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[24] Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 78.
[25] Ibid., 81.

Comment [JWG13]: It is interesting to me that we drop these kind of ethnic groupings into a nationalist framework because that is how the world wags just now…we assess global politics in terms of nations, and so splinter groups must also be conceived of as nations of a sort.

Comment [JWG14]: That is really interesting…it is, of course, inherent in the term "naturalization" but I'd never really thought of it in those terms before.

Comment [JWG15]: This is the sort of claim that needs a citation.

Ashutosh Varshney states that religious nationalism in India consists of two religions: Muslim and Hindu. According to Varshney, Muslim nationalism led to the creation of Pakistan in 1947 because Hindus and Muslims "were not two different religious communities but two separate nations."[26] He describes the concept of "religious nationalism" specifically regarding Hindus in India who, as a result of ethnic conflict with the Muslim community, attempted to "create a political unity among the Hindus, divided otherwise by the various castes, languages, and doctrinal diversities."[27] Benedict Anderson's definition creates an argument that a nation is political, yet fails to distinguish the politics of the state and the politics of nationalist religious and/or ethnic movements. Ashutosh Varshney's label describing the movements of the two religious groups as "nationalist" point to the idea that the concept of a nation can extend past the idea of a political state/ country into other forms of communal identity.

Benedict Anderson argues that a nation is a combination of modern cultures and historical events, yet he does little to account for internal historical issues in his thesis. He argues that a nation encompasses a "community," that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each [nation], the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."[28] Yet separatist movements, civil wars, and other internal unrest have persisted as national problems for centuries. When a nation enters a civil war, then, has it lost its right to nationhood? Is it suddenly characterized as something other than a "nation"?

Benedict Anderson does little to account for serious internal struggles and divisions within a state. He follows the assumption that any nation in question has a basis in loyalty and

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[26] Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civil Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, 56.
[27] Ibid., 71.
[28] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

Comment [JWG16]: This is a pretty abrupt transition. Try to pull your reader along from one idea to the next a big more gently.

Comment [JWG17]: Good, sharp observation.

Comment [JWG18]: I know I commented on this when we met, but I still really like this point. These are very good questions to ask of Anderson's framework.

brotherhood. Any nation affected by colonialism or competing ethnic/religious/political groups at some point has not possessed this "horizontal comradeship" that Anderson idealizes. Most nations did not start out with this perceived brotherhood and some modern nations still have serious internal conflicts. The founding of Canada, for instance, after British conquest of New France, included serious trouble for the British who attempted to rule the existing French inhabitants of what is now Canada. The *Canadien* inhabitants had far from a "horizontal comradeship" as they were not loyal to the British crown and "feared the loss of their culture and traditions…their institutions and their laws" because of the threat of assimilation by British governors.[29] Most of the world fell victim at one point to the effects of colonialism, and as such the modern nations were far from founded on an even ground of brotherhood. While some modern nations have progressed to a more level playing field of equalities and "horizontal comradeship," internal conflicts still persist.

Another challenge to Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation is the Native American community within the United States. The Native Americans live in seemingly nations within a nation, as they have claims to self-government and hold their own separate identities. Frankie Wilmer calls Native Americans "survivors of a colonial experience" as they survived attempts of assimilation and preserved their cultural identity throughout.[30] Arnold Krupat argues that Native American nationalists "tend to nurture separatism" with a focus on sovereignty.[31] In a progressive sense, despite governmental regulations and limitations on the Native American

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[29] Alain-G Gagnon and Raffaele Iacovino, "Quebec and Canada: Understanding the Federal Principle," ed. John Rex and Montserrat Guibernau, *The Ethnicity Reader 2nd Ed.*, 2010, 167.
[30] Frankie Wilmer, "First Nations in the USA," ed. John Rex and Montserrat Guibernau, *The Ethnicity Reader 2nd Ed.*, 2010, 197.
[31] Arnold Krupat, "Nationalism, Transnationalism, Trans-Indigenism, Cosmopolitanism: Four Perspectives on Native American Literatures," *Journal of Ethnic American Literature; Itta Bena*, no. 3 (2013): no page numbers available online.

Comment [JWG19]: In fact, India, from your previous point, is a good example of this, with an Indian ethnic/religious national movement cutting against the grain of its colonial identity as a part of Britain…while at the same time dealing with the separate internal issues that led to the creation of Pakistan right after independence from England.

Comment [JWG20]: I like this turn of phrase, and its esp. appropriate with the Native American example, given that they self-describe as nations.

communities/reservations, Native Americans function with a degree of sovereignty that defines a nation.

Benedict Anderson term "nation" leads to a different definition than the one he realizes and works with. Under Benedict Anderson's term, ethnicity, religion, and other forms of identity can also be considered nations, then what separates a political nation/country? To contrast Benedict Anderson's definition of nationalism, Anthony W. Marx's definition focuses more on the relationship of a nation and state. Nationalism, as defined by Marx, is "a collective sentiment or identity, bounding and binding together those individuals who share a sense of large-scale political solidarity aimed at creating, legitimating, or challenging states."[32] Marx not only recognizes that a nation functions in part as an aspect of identity, but also distinguishes a nation from other forms of identity by pointing out the reason an individual identifies with a nation in particular: political solidarity. Benedict Anderson mentions in passing that a nation is "political" without thoroughly explaining how a nation involves politics differently from other factors of identity.

Benedict Anderson fails to truly address how nationality as an aspect of identity differs from other aspects of identity. He fails to address how ethnicity and other forms of identity affect or relate to a nation. This lack of distinction results in a serious problem, as the modern individual in the globalized world identifies with several aspects of identity, all at once. According to the editors of *The Ethnicity Reader*, "it is simply a fact of human existence that human beings live within, and identify with, a multiplicity of groups according to occasion…"[33]

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[32] Anthony W. Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.
[33] Guibernau and Rex, *The Ethnicity Reader*, 4.

Comment [JWG21]: This sentence needs an "if", I think.

Comment [JWG22]: Good, but also probably true of people in most eras and most places.

As the world became more connected to technology, Ashutosh Varshney theorizes that "modernity changed the meaning of identities by bringing the masses into a larger, extralocal framework of consciousness. It made identities and communities wider and more institutionalized."[34] In that sense, a person belongs to multiple of Benedict Anderson's so-called imagined communities and thus feels a connection to many people, some all over the world. How then can a historian truly define a political nation, while still accounting for the other nations (or aspects of identity) that an individual associates with?

> **Comment [JWG23]:** Another good question.

Through the analysis of Anderson's generalized definition, the idea of a nation blankets all aspects of communal identity. Communal identities act as imagined communities by connecting people despite country lines, language barriers, and other boundaries. Perhaps a better definition of a "nation" would account for the idea of a nation within a nation. In this sense, any imagined community formed by a communal aspect of identity functions as a nation under Benedict Anderson's definition, but much like the idea of a Russian nesting doll, resides within a political state nation, governed by a political body. The political state nation has its own identity, but does not limit the many (or few) identities that flourish within the nation, and the identity nations within can extend beyond the political nation. This idea of a nation closely reflects the idea of a multicultural society. A multicultural society has a foundation in a "common sense of belong among its citizens…[that] cannot be based on shared cultural, ethnic, or other characteristics, for a multicultural society is too diverse for that, but must be political and based on a shared commitment to the political community." This reflects the identity that a political nation gives its constituents, while still allowing the nations of ethnicity, religion, etc. to

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[34] Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civil Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, 31.

run within. Moving forward, Benedict Anderson's definition raises questions about relations

with modern political nations and other communal identities that frequent them. As the modern

world becomes more familiarized with multiple aspects of identity, one must analyze how

identities affect nations, and how, in turn, nations affect identities.

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Comments:

This is a good, thoughtful essay. I enjoyed it, and I hope that you enjoyed the process of working on it (if not the actual writing, then at least the research and thinking that went into it). I like that you saw something in Anderson that you didn't agree with, and spent time dealing with the problems that you saw… good scholarship moves thinking forward by challenging ideas and ideological frameworks. In this case, you've identified some important holes in Anderson's work. Your point about nations within nations is well-taken, as is your question about how the Andersonian model deals with issues of internal division. If this were a longer (20+ page) essay I would encourage you to follow up on those ideas…I think there is probably quite a lot to say about them. Your essay does a good job of demonstrating how Anderson's own framework of an imagined community proves problematic in his application of it in description of nationalism. The constellation of imagined communities that people belong to and move through on a daily basis is an issue that he wants no part of.

I notice that you chose to stay away from the American Civil War, which might well have been a good decision. That's a complicated issue that is fraught with disagreement grounded in people's invested opinions. In the space and time that you had available to you, it was probably best to steer clear.

I don't have too much by way of critique…this is a fairly well-written essay, and fairly convincingly argued. On a stylistic note, you start a lot of your paragraphs with Benedict Anderson's name…enough that it became noticeable. You usually want to avoid that type of repetition, unless you are doing it for effect. That didn't seem to be the case here, so there is a bit of a feeling of reading off of a bullet point list. It's a pretty easy fix, though.

As I mentioned in our meeting, I greatly enjoyed having you in class this semester, and I am happy to be a reference for you in the future, or to help you in any way I can. Please don't hesitate to ask.

Have a great summer, and good luck to you moving forward!